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ABSTRACT

The major task of life is to become masterful. As individuals grow the choice of which tasks to attempt and how best to achieve mastery at them becomes increasingly under their control by the situations they choose to engage in and by perceptions of their abilities. Mastery oriented people tend to attribute failure to unstable, external factors (luck) or to controllable, internal factors (effort). In contrast, the helpless oriented people tend to attribute failure to stable, external factors (task difficulty), and to uncontrollable, internal factors (lack of ability). Previous research on mastery and helplessness has found that subjects classified as mastery oriented or helpless oriented differ in their views of success and failure. Classification has typically been made based on subjects' reactions to failure only. In this study 60 female and 30 male high school seniors received orientation scores on the basis of their typical attributions for successes and failures. These scores were used to predict achievement as measured by subjects' grades and their Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. It was found that success and failure together predicted achievement better than either alone. This finding has implications, not only for the theory of mastery and helplessness and the role of these orientations in achievement, but for understanding reactions to depression and other illnesses as well. (Author/ABL)

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The Role of Success in Mastery and Helpless Achievement Orientations

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Previous research on mastery and helplessness has found that subjects classified as mastery oriented or helpless oriented differ in their views of success and failure. Classification has typically been made based on subjects' reactions to failure only. Sixty female and thirty male high school seniors received orientation scores on the basis of their typical attributions for successes and failures. These scores were used to predict achievement as measured by subjects' grades and their Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. It was found that success and failure together predicted achievement better than either alone.

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The Role of Success in Mastery and Helpless Achievement Orientations

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From the moment of our first baby steps the major task of life is to become masterful. As we grow the choice of which tasks to attempt and how best to achieve mastery at them becomes increasingly under our own control in the situations we choose to engage in and in our perceptions of our own abilities and efforts. Recently, Dweck (1986) has identified two groups of people. One group, called mastery oriented, believes that success is due to their own efforts. The other group, called helpless oriented, doubts their ability to succeed. The groups differ not in actual ability, but in their perceptions of how their abilities and efforts contribute to performing a task.

Mastery oriented people tend to attribute failure to unstable, external factors (luck) or to controllable, internal factors (effort). They are more likely to persist at the same or a similar task in the near future. In contrast, the helpless oriented people tend to attribute failure to stable, external factors (task difficulty), and to uncontrollable, internal factors (lack of ability). When faced with a failure, they choose an alternate, often easier task (Dweck et al., 1978), engage in self-degradation, experience depression (Abramson et al., 1978) and manifest an increased susceptibility to disease (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). For helpless oriented people, believing that the cause of failure is internal and unchangeable appears to lower their motivation to keep trying. Note that the actual causes of success and failure (task difficulty, luck, effort and ability) are not as important in producing these effects as how they are perceived by the actor. Furthermore, these conclusions act as self-fulfilling prophesies: choosing

an easy task precludes helpless oriented people from ever really testing or expanding their abilities by working on a challenging task.

All of the research which has been done on mastery and helpless orientations has only used subjects' attributions for failure to classify them as mastery or helpless oriented and to predict later behavior (c.f. Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980). Similarly, the work of Seligman and his colleagues only looks at people's explanations for bad events. Yet mastery and helpless oriented children also view their successes differently (Diener & Dweck, 1980). Despite no differences in pre-failure performance, helpless oriented children underestimated their successes and overestimated their failures, viewed success as irrelevant to future performance, and expected no further successes to occur. In short, successes not attributed to the self were perceived as less successful. Dweck proposes that the helpless oriented person's distorted image of their own successes and failures is what leads to unrealistically low expectancy for future success and affects future goal choice (Diener & Dweck, 1980).

Methods

Sixty female and 30 male high school seniors volunteered to be in the study[1]. Subjects' beliefs about the causes of their own successes and failures were assessed and used to predict achievement[2]. Subjects were administered the orientation questionnaire during regular classtime in a group. This 20-item questionnaire was a modified version of the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale (IAR: Crandall, Katovsky & Crandall, 1978). The IAR presents subjects with a series of successes or failures for which they must indicate the most likely reason for that outcome happening to them. The subject then chooses between an internal reason and an external reason for that success or failure. In previous

studies on achievement orientation, responses to the 10 failure items of the IAR in which lack of effort was one of the choices have been used to classify subjects as mastery or helpless oriented. In the present study, these 10 failure items and the matching 10 success items were used. These 20 questions were re-worded to include a third cause, so that subjects choose from among effort, ability and some external explanation (task difficulty or luck) in explaining the imagined success or failure.

Subjects' responses to each of the questions were scored as +1 if they made the mastery attribution (lack of effort for a failure item; presence of ability for a success item), or -1 if they made the helpless attribution (lack of ability for a failure item; task ease or good luck for a success item). Subjects' received a 0 for choosing the other alternative for these items (task difficulty or bad luck for a failure item; high effort for a success item). The scores on individual questions were then summed separately for successes and failures. Positive scores indicate a mastery orientation, negative scores indicate a helpless orientation. Scores were left continuous for all analyses.

Achievement was measured by subjects' 3-year academic average, the grades they received in their Junior year in English and Math, and their math and verbal Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores.

Results and Discussion

The mean orientation score was 4.38 (SD=4.52), indicating that subjects as a group tended to be mastery oriented. Males average 5.77 (SD=4.05), while females averaged 3.68 (SD=4.61). This difference between the sexes was significant ($t=-2.09$, $df=88$, $p<.05$), indicating that males are more masterful than females. Note, however, the females in this sample are not helpless. Indeed, both sexes show a mastery orientation.

Multiple regression was used to predict achievement from scores on the orientation questionnaire. The first regression analysis entered success scores, failure scores and subject's sex as independent variables in the regression to see if success and failure independently contribute to the prediction of achievement. A second regression analysis combined success and failure scores into one composite score which was used along with subject sex to predict achievement. The significance of each in contributing to prediction was tested and compared using a t-test. The results are presented in table 1.

For all achievement measures, the most significant predictor of later achievement was the combined score on successes and failures. Furthermore, in predicting the 3-year grade average, there was a trend for success scores to be significant while failure scores were clearly not. In predicting English grades and SAT math scores the effect for success is significant and the effect for failure is significant also, though marginally. Sex was not a significant predictor of achievement. This indicates that prediction of achievement can be improved by including attributions to both successes and failures.

This finding has great implications, not only for the theory of mastery and helplessness and the role of these orientations in achievement, but for understanding reactions to depression and other illnesses as well. According to Abramson et al. (1978), the more specific people are in their attributions the less detrimental a failure will be. For example, a person who fails a test and believes that it was because he or she is a rotten person undeserving of good grades, will experience more depression than someone who believes that he or she failed from a lack of studying. The present results indicate that successes - as well as failures - are likely to generalize.

Footnotes

[1]The analysis presented here is part of a larger study on mastery and helpless achievement orientations (Miserandino, 1987).

[2]This suggests that reactions to successes are predictive of future behavior. It should be noted that the causal mechanism between orientation and achievement has not been established by earlier research nor by the present research. The term "prediction" is used loosely here to refer to the statistical prediction of achievement variables given a subject's achievement orientation. Although this inherently assumes a a causal connection between the two, such that orientation affects achievement, no such causal statement is intended, for it is very possible that achievement affects orientation.

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Table 1
PREDICTION OF ACHIEVEMENT
FROM ATTRIBUTIONS FOR SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

Achievement Measures	Predictors	t	p
3-year grade average			
	Successes	1.82	.07
	Failures	.96	.33
	Both	2.03	.04*
English			
	Successes	1.81	.07
	Failures	2.32	.02
	Both	3.21	.002**
Math			
	Successes	1.10	.27
	Failures	.11	.91
	Both	.81	.42
SAT Math			
	Successes	1.76	.08
	Failures	2.06	.04*
	Both	2.49	.01**
SAT Verbal			
	Successes	-.03	.98
	Failures	4.41	.0001**
	Both	3.43	.001**

* p<.05
** p<.01
Note: Models for successes and failures included sex but no interactions. Models for both included sex and interactions. The interactions were not significant.